

The logic of martyrdom: “Spending” the legacies of Bonhoeffer, Romero, and King Jr.

Jeremy Rios
jeremyr@nsac.bc.ca

Abstract

Bonhoeffer’s legacy has been marked by a certain plasticity; he can be made, and is in fact made, to champion and stand for a variety of causes. Is this plasticity a consequence of something innate in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, or could another metric be at work? This essay suggests that Bonhoeffer – as well as Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King Jr. – has been subjected to a something called the Logic of Martyrdom, a process by means of which the church commodifies, then spends, the image of the martyr. This “spending,” in turn, has the potential to operate in the service of a variety of aims, many of which may not align with the original convictions of the martyred figure. This article defines the Logic of Martyrdom (in five stages), illustrating it through three historical test cases, concluding with some suggestions for how to spend a martyr’s image well.

Keywords

Martyrdom; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Oscar Romero; Martin Luther King Jr.; analytic theology

Introduction

In this article I intend to examine the uses, and misuses, of three martyred figures in recent history. Opening with Haynes’ documentation of recent distortions of Bonhoeffer’s image in America, I will argue that an underlying logic of martyrdom accounts for the ways that Bonhoeffer – and other martyrs – are commodified and then spent by the church. This logic, once outlined, should then illuminate two specific dangers – on the one hand, a form of the genetic fallacy implies that we can only quote or utilize a martyred figure in its precise context; on the other hand, a kind of imagistic freefall permits images, divorced from any context, to mean

whatever we want them to. This economics of “spending”, with regard to martyrs, leaves us with a pressing question: how will we “read” and utilize the image of a given martyr with justice? To answer this, I will conclude by drawing upon two principles from hermeneutics and literary criticism.

Haynes’ account

In 1963 Martin Marty speculated that Bonhoeffer’s appeal lay in his placement as “the dislocated, displaced inhabitant of a secular world.”¹ In this respect, Bonhoeffer’s modern potency is laid at the feet of a certain liminality; he inhabits more than one world. We can argue from this that Bonhoeffer’s liminality has manifested itself in the intervening years in a certain plasticity – Bonhoeffer can be made, and is in fact made, to champion a variety of causes. In his 2018 monograph, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer: Debating Discipleship in the Age of Trump*, Stephen Haynes documents this process at some length. Haynes’ primary intent, of course, is to disentangle a degree of the confusion that has emerged in the wake of Metaxas’ 2011 biography. In the process, however, he also identifies some of the innate plasticity of Bonhoeffer’s legacy. For example, Haynes observes how, prior to Metaxas’ popular re-envisioning of Bonhoeffer, he had been viewed variously as a “Critical Patriot,” “Righteous Gentile,” and “Moral Hero”.² Additionally, among Evangelical interpreters, Bonhoeffer was seen variously as a “Christian hero,” “culture warrior,” “ecclesiological guide,” and “privileged critic”.³ Which Bonhoeffer is favoured is often determined by the political disposition of the interpreter. Haynes summarizes, “On the left, Bonhoeffer has been cited by Vietnam-era draft resisters, peace activists, and liberation theologians, while on the right he is looked to by Christian opponents of abortion and same-sex marriage.”⁴ Each emphasis, of course, leaves something important to the side – we get slices, at worst distortions, and never the whole picture of Bonhoeffer. This led to the

1 Martin E. Marty, (ed.), *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963), 14.

2 Stephen R. Haynes, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer: Debating Discipleship in the Age of Trump* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 11 ff.

3 Ibid., 30 ff.

4 Ibid., 2.

surreal situation in which American Christianity found itself in recent years, where Bonhoeffer's legacy is cited both in support and condemnation of Donald Trump's presidency.⁵

Haynes hints at the motive for this interpretive selectivity: "When the aim is to use the German hero's gravitas to seize rhetorical high ground, the details of his life and death are simply not that important."⁶ Interpreters, in other words, wish to spend the capital of Bonhoeffer's legacy without really having to reflect on the full content of that legacy.⁷ On this, Haynes strikes a somewhat grim note: the better Bonhoeffer becomes known, the more his life is seen as "inspiring," "the more difficult it becomes to keep misconceptions (and misquotes) from spreading."⁸

And yet, this distorting logic is not solely an activity of the consuming masses – scholars and literati do it as well. Bonhoeffer's name sells, and association with his name is sexy marketing. Not all scholars are scrupulous, and it is doubtless that some will use his name to advance their careers with only minimal reference to his thinking. Even senior Bonhoeffer scholars can claim that "No doubt if he were alive today, Bonhoeffer would be in favour of abortion." It seems prudent to urge caution any time someone speaks for the dead. In an ironic way, even Haynes' concluding appeal – directed to Trump-supporting American Bonhoeffer lovers – is made without reference to a close reading of Bonhoeffer. Haynes writes,

We who claim some kinship with Bonhoeffer must similarly resist becoming accustomed to ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that are anti-Christian, and antihuman, in spirit. And we must work to discredit claims on Bonhoeffer by those who do think, speak, and act in these ways. For these things we should be willing to battle.⁹

5 "... by the summer of 2017 Bonhoeffer had become a trusted and familiar weapon in the arsenal of the Trump resistance"; *ibid.*, 121.

6 *Ibid.*, 3.

7 Additionally, Haynes nods to the power of the WWII narrative: "But their [i.e., American Evangelicals] affinity for the symbols of anti-Nazi resistance illumines how profoundly the German Church Struggle's putative heroes have energized the American religious imagination"; *ibid.*, 59.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 135.

We may, and likely should be, in full agreement with Haynes here, but it is still noteworthy that there is a lack of engagement with Bonhoeffer in making it. Ironically, Haynes appeals to a legacy that must be defended but – in an unlikely kinship with the body of interpreters he has documented throughout the book – does not do so by means of an appeal to Bonhoeffer’s thinking. The result is that Haynes appears (on the surface) to be speaking as much “on Bonhoeffer’s behalf” as does anyone else.

The purpose here is not to criticize Haynes but to note the plasticity of application so often paired with Bonhoeffer’s name, and to note how it is practiced among the masses and scholars alike. Now we must ask: what accounts for this plasticity of use? In this article I will argue that the phenomenon of which Bonhoeffer is such a notable example is a manifestation of what I call the Logic of Martyrdom, a process by means of which the church commodifies, then spends, the image of the martyr. It is this “spending,” in turn, that has the potential to operate in the service of a variety of political and social aims, many of which may be at contrary purposes to the original convictions of the martyr.

The logic of martyrdom

To speak of a Logic of Martyrdom is consciously to depart from several standard ways of viewing the subject. The majority of traditional studies of martyrdom centre on the historical, documenting accounts of martyrdoms and describing the function of martyrs in the early Church.¹⁰ Another approach, and closely linked to these historical accounts, is a book such as Servais Pinckaers’ *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, where he documents the formative and paradigmatic influence of the idea of martyrdom on early Christian identity. “Thus,” Pinckaers writes, “the martyr is to us nothing less than a witness of Christ, convincing us to become witnesses in our turn in our own lives, just as he was before the judges and even after his death.”¹¹ New trends in geopolitics and interreligious dialogue invite the

10 See, for example, Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1986).

11 Servais Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom ... to the Limits of Love*, trans. Patrick M. Clark and Annie Hounsokou (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2016), 5.

examination made in a volume edited by Mona Fields and Cólín Owens, titled, *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-Sacrifice*.¹² There, modern trends in martyrdom are examined in order to explain its effect on the present from a variety of traditions (Christian, Jewish, Islamic). Alternatively, martyrdom can be utilized in theological discourse to point to or illuminate other topics, as John Behr does in his book *The Role of Death in Life*, where he argues that the image of martyrdom informs our theology of death.¹³

In contrast to these, I want to attempt to parse out an actual logic of martyrdom – the steps, and process, through which an individual becomes a martyr. I hope that by bringing clarity to this process – and illustrating it with Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King Jr. – we will be able to see why it is that martyrs can be (or are inevitably) “spent” in ways contrary to their message.¹⁴ Allow me to note the five stages briefly, then to revisit them with illustrations.

The Logic of Martyrdom involves a five-stage process enacted between the ecclesia and the individual martyr. In Stage 1, the ecclesia establishes a relationship to the individual. In Stage 2, the individual encounters and is captivated by a form of kerygma (here, *a message with a burden to be spoken*) that the individual then witnesses (martyrs) in two directions, both *to the Church*, and *to the World*. In Stage 3, the effect of the witnessed kerygma brings either the ecclesia or the world into sharp conflict with the individual, resulting in either the death or silencing of the martyr. In Stage 4, the martyrological event is subtly transformed into a currency of the Church, first by *sealing* the martyr in his or her testimony, then by *iconifying* the martyr – converting him or her into an image – and then by *commodifying* the martyr as an exchangeable quantity. In Stage 5, the currency of the martyr is finally spent, but at this point a crucial separation

12 Rona F Fields and Cólín Owens, *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-Sacrifice* (Westport; London: Praeger, 2004).

13 John Behr and Conor Cunningham, *The Role of Death in Life: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship Between Life and Death* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2016), 86.

14 I recognize that there is something of an “open question” regarding whether or not Bonhoeffer is technically a martyr. Irrespective of those arguments, he is certainly treated as one – and “spent” – in accordance with other figures in this study.

exists between the *original kerygma* of the martyr, and the *image of the martyr as utilized in the Church*. It is in this way that a given martyr – sealed, iconified, and commodified – can be utilized for ulterior ends within the ecclesia.

Let's revisit those five stages now, illustrating them from the lives of Romero, Bonhoeffer, and King.

Stage 1 – Ecclesia to individual

In Stage 1 the ecclesia establishes a relationship to the individual. This is a fairly straightforward claim, but I want to parse it out for a moment. The priority of community can be established with a simple observation: no martyr exists outside of community. Fundamentally, it is community that commemorates a martyr. Individuals who die for causes un-hitched to communities, no matter how valuable those causes, are not remembered and their message is forgotten.¹⁵ Furthermore, it certainly seems to be the case that in the Christian Church it is community that creates martyrs: conversion and participation in the life of the Church precede receipt of a kerygmatic message *for* the Church.

Oscar Romero, of course, was a priest well before he is called to be Archbishop of San Salvador, the situation that led to his death. Bonhoeffer was formed as a theologian and pastor well before the crisis of Nazi Germany emerged, and King was a pastor and theologian well in advance of his great social actions. In each case, relationship to the ecclesia formed the individual and preceded their kerygmatic awakening.

Stage 2 – Individual to kerygma

In Stage 2, the individual encounters and is captivated by a form of kerygma. I use kerygma here in the Greek sense – that of herald, and message. Specifically, I mean that we are dealing with a *message that carries*

15 I was asked, in response to this claim, if it suggests that persons cannot be martyrs if they are not remembered. I am inclined to argue that, in fact, memory is an essential component of martyrdom – I might even argue that community memory marks the difference between a martyr's and a meaningless death. I am also reminded of John's image in Revelation 6:9-11, of the martyrs in white emerging from under the throne. The message there appears clear: despite the delay in God's action, these blessed dead – and their prayers for justice – are remembered.

its own burden to be spoken. The paradigmatic figure for such a burden might be Jeremiah, who felt the word of God shut up like a fire in his bones, something that had to come out lest he burst (Jer. 20:9). The individual then, under the influence of this kerygma, witnesses (technically, *martyrs*) in two directions. One direction of witness is *to the Church* – once again, we might cite Jeremiah’s example, and add to it Isaiah and all the prophets. A second direction of witness is *to the World*. The word, preached, becomes a challenge; it typically identifies an area of complacency or injustice.

Oscar Romero was shaped by a variety of factors – trained as a priest in Rome, he was deeply loyal to the Pope. Raised as a Latin American priest, he was also deeply influenced by the conferences at Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979), which reinforced for him the preferential option for the poor. Convinced of these things, but humble and quiet, once Romero had been elevated to the level of Archbishop, he felt a new burden to announce these messages to all of El Salvador, which he did, regularly and boldly through his daily radio messages. To the Communists and capitalists, he condemned their materialism; to the oligarchy he condemned their hoarding of wealth and neglect of the poor. To the government, he condemned their methods of violence and harassment; to the poor, he condemned their alcoholism and lack of morals. Throughout, he claimed that his focus was simply, and solely, the dictates of the Gospel in the present circumstances.¹⁶

Similarly, an historical circumstance contributed to the kerygmatic awakening for Bonhoeffer – significantly, the Aryan Paragraph, and its answer in the Barmen Declaration, drew for Bonhoeffer his sense of the battle lines for the Church. Once again, it was a message that manifested itself both to the Church and the world. In this way we can examine his responses: to contribute to the Pastor’s Emergency League, to call out the German Christians for their complicity with the Nazis, to lead the seminary at Finkenwalde, the disposition to return to Germany when he might have

16 Biographical material on Oscar Romero taken from Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*, trans. Michael J Miller (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015).

weathered the war in America, and his ultimate choice to stand against Hitler; each was an outgrowth from this kerygmatic burden.¹⁷

Again, in the case of King., it is historical circumstance that awakens his encounter with the kerygma that would lead to his death. King, a child of a pastor and trained in seminary, had been reading Gandhi. He returned to the south to begin his life of church ministry. Of course, all the seeds of the Civil Rights movement were already in place, but the trigger that awakened King's unique message was Rosa Parks, the boycotts, the subsequent community organization, and following this the sea of coalitions (SCLC, etc.) formed across the American South to manage the campaigns, boycotts, and social action which would come to define King's legacy.¹⁸ His message, of nonviolent protest and the brotherhood of man, was a message clearly spoken to both the world and the church – to the world, on television screens and sit ins. It was uttered to the Church, most damningly, in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, where he calls out the hypocritical complacency of his fellow ministers.¹⁹

In each of these three cases there was a kind of awakening – not a radical, disjunctive awakening, but a fresh reappraisal of circumstances in light of personal conviction – that led the individual, from within their communities, to speak out in a fresh way.

Stage 3 – Kerygma to crisis

In Stage 3, the impact of this kerygma, witnessed by the individual, brings the ecclesia, the world, or both, into sharp conflict with the individual. This conflict commonly results in either the death or silencing of the martyr. To explain this process would require analysis beyond the scope of this article – drawing on sources psychological, sociological, and political. One brief account may suffice. According to a form of social theory called Bowen Family Systems Theory, systems – whether of the family, church,

17 Primary material on Bonhoeffer's life is taken from Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

18 Biographical material on King is taken primarily from Carson Clayborne, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: Abacus, 2000).

19 Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream/Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Logan: Perfection Learning, 1990).

or society – naturally seek to preserve their status quo. Agents within those systems that challenge the status quo bring anxiety to the whole system, and the intensity of that anxiety often creates the desire to silence the individual.²⁰ In the cases of martyrdom, this process can be seen to operate in order to silence the person violently. Phrased differently, a given message, originally independent of the individual, becomes identified with the individual. The result is that the structures and persons criticized by the kerygma reason that silencing the messenger will silence, or limit, the message itself.

Romero, in preaching his message of non-violence, care for the poor, and condemnation of corrupt power, becomes a key figure in El Salvadorian public life. His enemies are manifold – they are in the government, the oligarchy, the military, the revolutionaries, and even among his fellow Catholic bishops in El Salvador. When, in 1980, he preaches a sermon urging soldiers to ignore orders to kill civilians, his death warrant is effectively sealed, and an assassin murders him at the altar after performing a funeral mass for a friend.²¹ Bonhoeffer's convictions have led him to participate in acts of espionage against the Nazi government, and even to join a plot against Hitler's life. He is silenced first by imprisonment, and later by execution. King's message of nonviolent civil action, justice for all, and Christian brotherhood raises him to be a figurehead for both the Civil Rights movement and for those who would see it stopped. Consequently, he is assassinated by James Earl Ray, a man sympathetic to white supremacy (and even to Hitler) – someone, perhaps, who felt acutely the anxiety raised by King's kerygma.

Stage 4 – The individual commodified

In Stage 4, the martyrological event is subtly transformed into a currency of the Church. This seems to happen in three steps. First, the martyr is *sealed* in his or her testimony; death locks the person in time. Additionally, death – and especially violent death in the service of a great cause – causes a reverse sanctification of the individual. Pinckaers traces this effect back

20 For an expansive survey of this process, although without reference to martyrdom, see Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. (New York: Guilford Publications, 1985).

21 Morozzo della Rocca, *Oscar Romero*, 213.

to the very beginning of Christianity, writing that “Martyrdom was hence regarded by the early church to be a suitable substitute for the sacrament of baptism, effectively incorporating the disciple into the Body of Christ.”²² This “baptism of blood” purifies, through suffering, the individual soul – alike Romero, Bonhoeffer, and King receive the benefits (in varying degrees) of this reverse purification. The case for Romero to be made a saint – the apex of Catholic purity – starts immediately; Bonhoeffer’s “liberal” theology is overlooked by “conservatives” (e.g., his approaches to scriptural authority and history), and his “conservative” theology by “liberals” (e.g., his thoughts on abortion, marriage, and the monarchy); and King’s sexual indiscretions are forgiven.

In a second step the martyr is *iconified*; by this I mean that the person is converted into an image. The picture of the martyr gains power in itself – Romero in vestments at the altar, King on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, Bonhoeffer in borrowed trousers at Flossenbürg. Like Victorian death keepsakes, the images of each become an enduring memento for the dead. Consequently, in each case the image of the martyr gains fresh power as a substitute – even a cypher – for the message that can no longer be spoken.

Third, and finally, the martyr is subtly *commodified*, transformed into an exchangeable, spendable quantity. Incapable of further personal speech, the community which regards him as a martyr speaks on his behalf; no longer able to control a kerygmatic legacy, the community that remains advances that legacy for its own ends, utilizing the martyr’s message, and image, toward those purposes.²³ Here we approach the final stage.

Stage 5 – Commodity spent

In Stage 5, the currency of the martyr is spent, but at this point a crucial separation exists between the *original kerygma* of the martyr, and the *image of the martyr as utilized in the Church*. I will turn immediately to examples.

22 Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom*, xx.

23 Smith, approaching this process, writes that “The principle of inverse optics operates when viewing martyrs: the more distant they are, the more attractive they appear”; Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 14.

We have already noted Bonhoeffer's uses and misuses, especially in the American political climate. Such "spending" of Bonhoeffer's kerygmatic legacy cannot, without distortion, equally support all the causes to which it is applied.

A now-familiar image of MLK Jr., his face desaturated and set on a background of red and blue vertical washes, has been repurposed hundreds of times – I might even call it the "martyrological frame." The image has a fascinating history – it was "first" used by artist Sheperd Fairey, who created the frame for the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama.²⁴ Very likely the framing of the image was meant to evoke other images of famous hopefulness – there is a strong kinship between it and the image of Che Guevara, looking up into the distance. Obama's image was almost immediately framed alongside one with King (other iterations in turn featured Guevara, Nelson Mandela, and others). The image rapidly became emotional shorthand for a kind of meaning. It is a fascinating example of how the martyr's image can be spent for the purpose of emotional capital.²⁵

Romero, immediately upon his death, was a figure utilized by many different sides during El Salvador's subsequent twelve years of civil war – these uses, in fact, contributed directly to the delay in his canonization. Claimed by the communists and the revolutionaries alike, the Catholic Church hesitated to sanction him for fear of further disrupting El Salvadorian politics.²⁶

Curiously, all three of these figures have also been the subject of misattributions. Their names, and voices, are given to words they never spoke. Haynes at some length disentangles the history of the non-Bonhoeffer phrase, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil; God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."²⁷ Similarly, immediately after Romero's death a journalist reported that he had said, "If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador." But it is highly unlikely that Romero said any such thing – he had no aspirations to be a

24 "First" is in scare quotes because Fairey repurposed an image from the Associated Press for his poster and became the subject of a subsequent lawsuit. It is in itself an ironic episode in the history of re-appropriating such commodified images.

25 See Appendix A for a series of these images.

26 Morozzo della Rocca, *Oscar Romero*, 226.

27 Haynes, *The Battle for Bonhoeffer*, 104ff.

martyr, only to be faithful.²⁸ King has been credited with the phrase, “I mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy.” Again, he didn’t say it.²⁹ In each case, the temptation to link a really juicy quote to the authority of the image – to spend the capital of the martyr for the purposes of a slightly different message – is apparently too great.

We could continue to document these expenses for some time, but we should pause and offer three observations about them. The first observation is to assert that this kind of martyrological “spending” appears to be inevitable. Consider Tertullian’s famous dictum that “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Whatever theological or historical insights we might gain from reflecting with the Church Father in this way, we can also note that he sees the event of martyrdom *as a thing that does something else*. It is an exchange, the blood of the individual martyr for the sake of the Church, yes; but also the message of the martyr for the theology of Tertullian. Tertullian, in other words, spends his martyrs in crafting his ecclesial theology. I don’t say this to criticize Tertullian, but rather to reframe what may be a corrupted understanding of what it means to “spend.” It suggests that the problem is not in spending martyrs, but in spending them well; we are looking not to stop the process, but rather to administrate it justly.

A second observation is that the separation between the martyr and the message in use by the church is also inevitable. No community possess the complete message of any figure; each community, or slice of community, possesses a part. None of us shares 100% of Bonhoeffer’s mind – instead we have affinities and are drawn by personal and political and social circumstances to some parts over others. There must always be a separation between the kerygma of the martyr and its preservation, and use, by a community.³⁰

28 Morozzo della Rocca, *Oscar Romero*, 136 ff.

29 <https://www.good.is/articles/that-martin-luther-king-quote-is-fake-use-these-instead>

30 John de Gruchy, in his essay “Bonhoeffer: Theologian and Witness,” treats these ideas with some sophistication – especially where drawing on Bethge’s insights. He writes, “Most misappropriations of Bonhoeffer’s theology result either from a “static” approach to the texts or from what Bethge has called the “creative misuse” of Bonhoeffer. The former approach attempts to interpret Bonhoeffer literally, objectively, and uncritically; its proponents try to be faithful to the text by avoiding bringing to it the issues and

This brings me to the third and final observation, which sums up the other two – what we need is a just economics of martyrdom. We must strive, somehow, to spend the legacies of figures like Romero, Bonhoeffer, and King with justice to their original message, but without slavish obeisance. In other words, we require not censure, but good practice. It is to that good practice that I want now to turn.

Two dangers and two ways through

The goal in this final section is to articulate a just economics of martyrological spending. To do this, I will highlight two dangers, and then note two possible ways of avoiding them.

The two dangers are as follows. On the one hand is a form of the genetic fallacy, which claims that if I can dismiss the origin of an idea, I have dismissed the idea. Adapting this slightly, this is an argument that a given kerygma, or martyr, only has relevance in his or her original context. On this side, we limit the impact and application of a martyr's witness with a barrage of historical controls. A crusty enculturation that regards all modern application as forbidden severely – perhaps even fatally – curtails any further application of a given witness.

On the other hand is what we might call imagistic freefall – in other words, the reduction to memes. An image, fully divorced from context, can be recontextualized – and repurposed with fresh text – to say and communicate nearly anything. I've already attempted to show how powerful this can be with the images of King, Obama, and Che Guevara, and in the utilization of Bonhoeffer's legacy in North America.

questions that arises out of their own historical situation. Bonhoeffer is, in a sense, sanitized and kept at a reasonably safe distance. At the other extreme, those who have "creatively misused" Bonhoeffer have appropriated his theology in a highly arbitrary and subjective way in order to serve their own purposes. Perhaps most interpreters of Bonhoeffer are guilty to some extent of one or both of these tendencies. But when these tendencies dominate interpretation, they deny what is crucial to an understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology – that is, its historical and dialectical development. Bonhoeffer, it would appear, is brought in to reinforce positions already adopted rather than to open them up to fresh insight and possible transformation." There is, to my mind, some question as to whether or not de Gruchy follows his own recommendations in the subsequent essays; John de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 35.

Both of these dangers – crusty enculturation and meme-ification are unacceptable. Bonhoeffer, Romero, and King have legacies that should be applied and spent today; but not in a way that is divorced from their generating contexts. How will we navigate the dangers? I have two proposals.

First, to address the danger of crusty historical enculturation, I want to appeal to the hermeneutical reading strategy advocated by F.F. Bruce in his seminal book, *This is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes*.³¹ Bruce argues that when reading a given NT quotation of an OT text, the authors of the NT are always appealing to a broader context. Bruce writes that when exegeting a given NT passage, “the occasion arises to stand back at some distance and view the whole picture – in particular to consider the dominant motifs which recur throughout the biblical literature and bind the two Testaments together.”³² There is no such thing, on his account, as a simple proof-text; rather, each quotation opens a door to a broader room of cultural motifs and agenda, wherein the real resonances between the Old and New Testaments are to be found. For example, hearing Isaiah’s servant songs in light of the figure of Cyrus removes the modern reader from the simple association between Jesus and text and broadens understanding to encapsulate a larger picture of kingship, power, and exile.³³ *Mutatis mutandis*, when reading Bonhoeffer for modern application, we are searching not for one-to-one correspondences between his life and the present day but broadening the iris of our lens to perceive significant cultural overlaps. The harmonies are to be found in the bigger picture, and, sufficiently grasping that picture, permit us to offer judicious parallels.

Second, to address imagistic freefall – or meme-ification – I want to apply a principle that C. S. Lewis articulates in his book, *An Experiment in Criticism*. There he describes two different kinds of reading. The first, he calls “Egoistic Castle Building.” In this mode, a given reader reads from a starting point

31 Bruce’s book builds upon work done by Dodd in 1952. For his account, see C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952), 61–110.

32 F. F. Bruce, *This Is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1968), 18.

33 *Ibid.*, 84–85.

of selfishness in order to experience all the benefits of the author's world, while laying aside all the liabilities; he travels to the Alps, wins the girl, or is the hero of the adventure. He reads to insert himself, his preferences, and tastes, *into* the work. Contrasting this, Lewis calls another form of reading "Disinterested Castle Building". In this mode, the reader experiences the book as a spectator – the ego has been side-lined, and the author's purposes are given foreground.³⁴ Our first desire is to see and experience what the author intended. This seems to me a helpful principle for navigating the danger of imagistic freefall. A significant injustice done in our economics of martyrological spending is a preponderance of personal ego – it is only by a form of misreading, and misreading for personal gain, that I can disregard the complexity of a Bonhoeffer, Romero, or King in order to win political points. The disinterested posture permits each martyr to speak for himself, and from that speaking to retain a measure of his integrity. Another passage from Lewis may illuminate this further,

Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realises the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors. We realise it best when we talk with an unliterary friend. He may be full of goodness and good sense, but he inhabits a tiny world. In it, we should be suffocated. The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison. My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee; more gladly still would I perceive the olfactory world charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog.³⁵

Reading selfishly (egotistically) cripples this process of seeing alongside, while the "disinterested" posture that Lewis suggests can invite fresh perspective without loss of integrity to the subject in question.

34 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 50–56.

35 *Ibid.*, 140.

Conclusion

The logic of martyrdom seems to involve an inevitable commodification. When using the image and message of a martyr in the present day we must map a path between crusty enculturation and imagistic freefall. I believe that a hermeneutics of context and disinterested reading are extremely helpful first steps. Only good can come from the reduction of an invasive ego and the oversimplicity of proof-texting when engaging in this kind of interpretation. Once again, a just economics of martyrological spending is the purview of every Christian consumer, and if it is true that we, who are the stewards, proponents, and instructors of critical thinking, are also susceptible to abuse in this area, then that is all the more a mandate for us to reflect crucially on this kind of just economics.

Bibliography

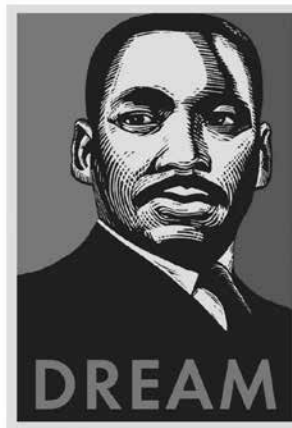
- Behr, John, and Conor Cunningham. *The Role of Death in Life: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship Between Life and Death*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2016.
- Bouyer, Louis. *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*. London: Burns & Oates, 1986.
- Bruce, F. F. *This Is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes*. Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1968.
- Clayborne, Carson. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr*. London: Abacus, 2000.
- Dodd, C. H. *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology*. London: Nisbet & Co., 1952.
- Fields, Rona F, and C oil n Owens. *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-Sacrifice*. Westport; London: Praeger, 2004.
- Friedman, Edwin. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: Guilford Publications, 1985.
- Gruchy, John de. *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

- Haynes, Stephen R. *The Battle for Bonhoeffer: Debating Discipleship in the Age of Trump*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018.
- King Jr., Martin Luther. *I Have a Dream/Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Logan: Perfection Learning, 1990.
- Lewis, C. S. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961.
- Marty, Martin E., ed. *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963.
- Morozzo della Rocca, Roberto. *Oscar Romero: Prophet of Hope*. Translated by Michael J Miller. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2015.
- Pinckaers, Servais. *The Spirituality of Martyrdom ... to the Limits of Love*. Translated by Patrick M. Clark and Annie Hounsokou. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2016.
- Schlingensiepen, Ferdinand. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*. Translated by Isabel Best. London: T&T Clark, 2012.
- Smith, Lacey Baldwin. *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Appendix A: The logic of martyrdom in images



Fairey's original image, echoing this famous picture of Che Guevara





The colour scheme was then repurposed to highlight other key public figures/martyrs (including returning to Che Guevara).



Printing the image in repeat, people were perhaps unaware of the associations with Warhol's experiments in repetition and commodification



In a final irony, the mass repetition of posters appears to mimic Warhol's further experiments in exploring commodities and repetition. In this respect, use of mass images appears to reinforce the ultimate commodification of personal image in the service of sale-able message.